



King County

Susan Craighead
Presiding Judge

King County Superior Court

News Release

Date: February 12, 2015

Contact: Paul Sherfey, 206-477-2472
Chief Administrative Officer

A call to action to address racial disproportionality in the juvenile justice system

Remarks by King County Superior Court Presiding Judge Susan Craighead regarding the Children and Family Justice Center, as delivered at the court's annual Tribute to Justice Thurgood Marshall, Thursday, Feb. 12, 2015:

On behalf of the Court, today I come to you with a bold statement the likes of which you do not often hear from government. We are sorry we have not been listening well enough to our community. Some people are shouting at us because they do not feel they are being heard. Many other people in our community may not be shouting, but they may perceive the County as tone deaf. We must sit down with them and listen. And we need to speak frankly about the institutional racism and racial disparity that persist in our juvenile justice system.

In 2014 in King County, for the first time, the number of referrals for African-American youth exceeded the number of referrals for white youth. More than half the cases in King County Juvenile Court were filed against African-American youth, while they make up just under 10 percent of the population. On any given day in 2014, 51 percent of the youth held in detention were African-American. As a County, we have done much great work to reduce the number of juvenile court filings and the number of youths in detention by 72% in 12 years. But these efforts have disproportionately benefited white youth. Youth of color remain ensnared in our juvenile justice system.

This situation is utterly untenable. The number of youth in the juvenile justice system is going down, but the percentage of African-American youth is going up, despite the work of many people of good will in County government. Racial disproportionality and the vestiges of racism have no place in our justice system and we will continue to do everything in our power to eliminate them.

As leaders of our justice system, we must take responsibility for our role in allowing racial disproportionality to be a fact of life in the juvenile justice system. We deeply regret this. And today we ask for the community's help to make things right.

At the same time, we have been hearing many voices who are concerned not only about racial disparity in our juvenile justice system, but who also believe it is wrong to incarcerate juveniles at all. These voices have turned the replacement juvenile court building into a symbol for all that is wrong with the juvenile justice system. While it has not always been easy hearing from these voices, they challenge us to do better.

No judge wants to place a young person in detention. We know that detention can increase recidivism and the chances of failure in school. This is why we try to reserve detention for those who are accused of serious offenses and for whom there are no realistic alternatives. And too often judges find they have no realistic alternatives.

We have been challenged to envision a world where there is no need to incarcerate youth at all. As much as we wish we could, we cannot implode juvenile detention tomorrow with no alternatives in place, especially for youth who cannot be released to their parents or guardians. Mothers, fathers, faith leaders, educators, and community workers need to suggest to us community-based and other alternatives to detention that can work and be accepted by the people of King County.

The racial disparity problem we call out today is faced by urban centers across the country. No one so far has been able to eliminate disproportionality. We have the opportunity to set an example for other communities in this nation as we try, together, to find answers.

Today we announce we are immediately embarking on a series of listening sessions with the families we serve, with the leaders in our community, and with a broad swath of community organizations throughout the County. We will bring together their ideas and combine them with what the data show about the youth who wind up in our juvenile justice system and, in particular, our detention center. We have done more than just about any other urban center to reduce the use of detention; now we need to know more about the youth who remain there, where they come from, and what their stories are.

Already our community has told us that, too often, youth of color are suspended or expelled from school and wind up in detention charged with crimes, well on their way to prison as adults. Some local school districts are starting to explore using the restorative justice model in lieu of exclusionary discipline. In Juvenile Court we are starting a pilot project this month to use the restorative justice model as an alternative to prosecution.

We also know that our financially strapped child welfare system may not be able to help families heal from the problems that lead to a call to Child Protective Services. What resources can our community provide to help?

We have heard young men of color report unwarranted police attention—walking or driving while black or brown. We in the justice system cannot stand by as the community's perception of justice declines. Neither should we discourage law enforcement from protecting and serving in African-American or Latino neighborhoods. How can we help to achieve this balance?

These listening sessions will start as soon as next week. As we gather community input and study the stories of youth in detention, we will learn what other professional community partners need to be invited to the table. All of us in County government share this concern about disproportionality. We share with the community the desire to reduce the number of youth in detention. Prevention will take the partnership of everyone with a role in the system, and that includes school districts, child welfare, and law enforcement. We need to hear what the community thinks might work so we can all align our efforts on behalf of helping young people succeed and flourish, outside of the juvenile system.

For me and my colleagues, we hope that by genuinely listening and responding to the ideas we hear from the community, we might begin to regain the trust and confidence of our entire community.

This is not easy. Juvenile Court by itself cannot eliminate disproportionality. We need many community partners to address all of the factors that lead to youth of color being brought to our door. We cannot succeed in this effort without the community helping us to develop alternatives to detention. The community as a whole must tackle this problem alongside us and it will take all of us working together to solve it.

#